Analysis of Voltaire versus Leibniz

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Francois-Marie Arouet was a historian, writer, and philosopher known by his pseudonym *Voltaire.* As being a major contributor of the Enlightenment period, he advocated for freedoms many fellow Frenchmen did not dare, such as freedom of religion, speech, and separating church and state. He was such a key to the French Enlightenment, the period has been called "The Age of Voltaire." This essay will introduce the main criticisms Voltaire had for the philosophical work by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz brought up in his satirical book *Candide*. The criticisms are against Leibniz's stances of organized religion, class hierarchies, politics and power, and optimism as an ideal on the basis that this is the best of all possible worlds. Voltaire, in contrast with Leibniz, was against organized religion, class hierarchy, abuse of power in politics, and optimism as a philosophy. I will also provide my support and contentions.

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz was a German philosopher and is considered one of the greatest minds in history. One of his most famous and debated phrases in his philosophical work, *Theodicy,* was that Earth is "the best of all possible worlds." He was an Optimist in that all things that happen in the world are for God's benefit and that this world is better than what else there could be. He thought this even in the face of war, disease, and all of the human evils that plague the world. Leibniz's belief in 'the best

of all possible worlds' stems from his philosophical theism where his rationalization for the existence of God was not founded in a religion rather through human reason.

Voltaire was a deist, believing in a Higher Being who is unknowable, but can be called 'God.' Voltaire was not a part of organized religion and expressed more criticisms of the benevolence of God than Leibniz would have been comfortable. Leibniz held a mixture of religious beliefs, but was not a part of organized religion, yet he went to great lengths in order to prove the necessary existence of God, including His benevolence, omnipotence, and omniscience. In the book *Candide*, Voltaire's character, 'Candide,' is met by the character 'the Grand Inquisitor.' The Inquisitor character is a symbol of religious hypocrisy and power in politics as he is able to act as legislator, judge, jury, etc. when it comes to finding and condemning those that do not share his religious beliefs. Nevertheless, this character's hypocritical positions such as raping Candide's love interest and sharing her with another religious man, demonstrates Voltaire's position that he believes organized religions to be filled with hypocrisies (19). This criticism by Voltaire is an example of how religion, and this world, is not the best that it could be, which is a direct attack on Leibniz's statement that this is the best of all possible worlds (1, 8, 13, 96).

Throughout Europe, Aristocracy was and still is prevalent. Aristocracy is the sociopolitical philosophy that people are born to be great or lesser, and these legal structures separate and make unequal various classes in

which people are born into. Aristocracy in this sense is also known as being a class hierarchy. This practice is evident throughout the book *Candide* as seen through the characters and their roles, such as kings, Count Pococurante, barons, Cunegonde, etc. Voltaire, being more of the pessimist that he was, makes fun of such establishments, e.g. a baron's sister would not marry Candide's father because his family had one fewer number of noble than she (24). This inequality within the world that Voltaire paints for his readers illustrates once more that the world in which we live is not as good as it could possibly be, and this is another attack on Leibniz's stance that this is the best of all possible worlds.

In conjunction with Aristocracy, power and politics play a part of that system but are not necessarily restricted to social hierarchical systems. It is a typical sentiment that absolute power corrupts absolutely. It is also a common criticism to suggest that people in power become vain in their high position within society. Such is the case with one of the characters in *Candide*, the governor of Buenos Aires, Don Fernando. He also goes by the names Don Fernando d'lbaraa, Figueroa, Mascarenes, Lampourdos, and Souza. Voltaire is depicting the pettiness and vanity stricken powers-that-be with possessing so many names and having such pride in them (32). Throughout the book, characters kowtow to and coddle various leaders in belief of their grandeur, such as King Charles Edward, Emperor Ivan, and Sultan Achmed (84, 85, 87). This is Voltaire's way of criticizing the divine right of kings and governing powers, as they are portrayed as being

imbeciles. This satirical criticism is yet another attack on Leibniz's statement that this is the best of all possible worlds.

At the end of each plot twist, the sentiment is humorously repeated by Voltaire's cast of characters that "this is the best of all possible worlds." Of course, this being a satire of Leibniz's *Theodicy*, it is used to point out the contrary that this is in fact not the best of all possible worlds. Leibniz's belief that it is the best is demonstrated as being overly optimistic. Pangloss, who is Candide's philosophy teacher and a caricature of Leibniz himself, makes the statement that everything is made for a reason. Voltaire uses humor in saying that the nose is made for glasses, pigs so we can have pork, and the legs for pants. However, this satire of optimism is categorically incorrect in that it was the glasses made to fit the nose, pork is a byproduct of butchering pigs, and pants were made for legs (2). Voltaire exaggerates throughout the book in order to bring readers to the conclusion that blind optimism is not beneficial or realistic. *Candide* is pessimistic about the world and the evils in it as Voltaire shows wars, rape, theft, enslavement, aging, indecency, etc. A world without each of these things would be a better world, so Voltaire is using pessimism as a means to combat Leibniz's optimism and suggests this is not the best of all possible worlds.

I do find Voltaire's pessimism to be more persuasive than Leibniz's optimism, and I agree that this world could be better than it is. I do envision a world without wars, rape, theft, enslavement, etc. However, in Voltaire's

pursuit of disproving Leibniz via *reductio ad absurdum*, he seems to go too far. When the character Candide sees that his love interest, Cunegonde, has aged severely, it seems that Voltaire thinks of this as an evil in the world, or that it could be better without signs of aging. Such an example demonstrates that he is imagining a utopia, a heaven on Earth. It is not realistic as the ecology of the universe, Earth, and humanity especially are always at odds. At first, Voltaire provides enough evidence that, indeed, the world is by no means perfect and could be better, but unrealistic examples such as lack of signs of aging or financial status differences among people only hurt his argument to shift the reader to a medium between Leibniz and Voltaire.

As for the argument that this is the “best of all possible worlds,” I do not see the point in it as this is the world we live in, and it is what it is. We can only do what we can to make the world we live in better for ourselves and others, if we so choose. The struggles that we have, such as aging, storms, disease, cancer, etc. make us stronger and allow us to learn to overcome obstacles. Without these wickeds in the world, we would not be able to compare to the goodness it possess making it an unrealistic or impossible world, unfathomable to human nature.

Work Cited

Voltaire. *Candide, Voltaire - Electronic Scholrly Publishing ... - ESP*. 1998, www.esp.org/books/voltaire/candide.pdf.